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Believing as the British did in the exclusive notions of state authority contrary to 'divisible' or 'discrete' perception of authority practised by Indians, the British Raj tried from the very inception to impose their absolute supremacy on Indian society by establishing law and order. In so doing, they showed their utmost concern in collective criminal actions which were perceived as most threatening to their existence in India.¹ Dacoity, which was considered as the most defiant form of collective action against state authority and which was widespread in the then Bengal, was at once thought to be a challenge and a reflection on the empire's ability to rule. Moreover, collective actions of this kind was susceptible to stimulation by widespread economic and social unrest over such matters as famins, scarcity, tenancy grievances, onerous burden of taxation and the like.² Hence, to contain open violence before it became contagious, and of course, to impose the will of the state, the British government in Bengal from the onset adopted vigorous measures to stamp out the crime of dacoity.

In this article, an attempt will be made to throw some light on the activities of the Dacoity Commission instituted in April, 1852 for the suppression of dacoity in Bengal. Part I is a background leading to the institution of the office of the Dacoity Commissioner along with a short account of the early efforts at controlling dacoity. It also discusses the organizational set-up of the Office of Dacoity Commissioner and the methods employed for the apprehension and committal of criminals. The drive against the suppression of professional gangs, both in land and in water, in the various districts of Bengal is the subject-matter of Part II. The results of the campaign is discussed in the next Section along with a brief commentary on the reasons for the abolition of the Office of Dacoity Commissioner.

The earliest attempt at controlling dacoity came soon after the Company established its own courts in 1772. The Committee of Circuit which was entrusted with the responsibilities of enacting rules for the suppression of dacoity framed very rigorous anti-dacoity measures as these criminal wretches "had placed themselves in a state of declared war with our Government". The measures adopted were so very terrifying that dacoits were often executed in the midst of the neighbours and relations as an example for others.³ Like the Committee of Circuit, Warren Hastings was

* The names of places and persons have been spelled as found in the original texts

also in favour of stiff enactments of government to "interpose the authority or influence of the Company".⁴ He was of the view that every convicted felon, and murderer, not condemned to death by the sentence of the *Adawalat* should be sold as slaves or transported to the Company's establishment at Fort Marlborough.⁵ However, all such harsh measures proved ineffectual.⁶ Lord Minto, who became Governor-General of India in 1807, also decided to fight the prevalence of gang robbery which continued to infest many of the districts in the province of Bengal causing "disturbances" and "loss by the robbery of remittances of Public Treasure".⁷ With a view to curbing that, among other things, he appointed a Superintendent of Police (under Regulation X of 1808) whose duty it was to concentrate information obtainable from different parts of the country in a particular office in the Presidency, devise plan of operations and execute when the efforts of the Local Police would be unavailing.⁸ For the purpose of discovering the haunts, and pointing out the persons of the most notorious of the dacoits, or of any of their associates, the government also decided to employ public informers.⁹ W. C. Blaquiere, who resided in Bengal from his earliest years, was vested with magisterial powers in such other districts as, like Nadia, had been overrun with dacoits.¹⁰ It was Blaquiere who probably first developed here the system called Approver Witnesses which was subsequently to be used elsewhere in India. With the evidence primarily supplied by approver witnesses, *goyendas* or spies and informers, and extension of Blaquiere's functions, anti-dacoity operations for the first time met with considerable success. In the words of Blaquiere himself: "The detection, conviction, and bringing to condign punishment by hanging many offenders at the period produced a great amelioration, and the crime of dacoity was unknown in the Districts of Nuddea and Hooghly for some years afterwards."¹¹ Dacoity figures for the Lower Provinces came down from an average of 1481 during 1803-07 to 260 in 1817 and still to a lower figure of 167 in 1828.¹²

Gang robbery in Bengal proper which probably remained low till about 1840, however, started to climb upwards again reaching the figure of 615 in 1849 and in the years 1852 and 1853 to 786 and 774 respectively. The condition had become so terrible that "in the districts afflicted with this dreadful social evil, no man, with property worth Rupees 200 in his house, can lay down to rest at night without the most vivid and well-founded fear, that he and his family will be awakened in the night by the assault of these merciless plunderers, who only omit to murder, as well as to rob, when the terror of their attacks has prevented all attempts at resistance".¹³ Similar sense of insecurity was also voiced in a public petition received from several respectable landholders and other inhabitants of the districts of Burdwan,

Hooghly and Kishnaghur, complaining that thefts and gang robberies had been increasing to such an extent as to have given rise to a feeling of general insecurity in the minds of the people.¹⁴ But what probably weighed high in the minds of British administrators was the fact that these "horde of banditti" were "organized" under regular leaders "within a few miles of the seat of Government"¹⁵ and that gang robbery "if not checked, reflect discredit upon the Government".¹⁶ Hence, "stringent steps" were advocated to put them down "by all means which lie in our power".¹⁷ Earlier, it may be mentioned, institutionalized efforts at controlling Thuggee was undertaken by the government with commendable success and this was followed by a campaign against the suppression of dacoity undertaken by government of North-West Provinces in 1837 (the Office of Commissioner for the Suppression of Dacoity was united with that of the General Superintendent for the Suppression of Thuggee throughout India with effect from 12 February, 1839 at the directive of Lord Auckland, the Governor-General).¹⁸ Such measures for Bengal were also advocated by D. C. Smyth before the Police Committee. He suggested immediate deputation of an officer, as Special Commissiomer, to try the commitments, with power to pass final sentence, extending even to death, without any reference whatever to the Court of *Nizamat Adawlat*. The prompt punishment of the offence, and the consequent terror that would be created in the breasts of the dacoits, he was confident, would put down the offence altogether.¹⁹ But as the crime of dacoity was then less frequent and not attended with the circumstances of atrocity which they used to be,²⁰ the Police Committee felt that the creation of a special agency need only be constituted when the offence of dacoity became epidemic. "In cases of Dacoity, when that disease of the Bangal Provinces becomes as it were epidemic, it is then to be overcome only by special remedies, and like Thuggee in Central India, must be met by extraordinary arrangements."²¹

In the early 1850s when the hopelessness of the existing mechanisms of crime control became totally apparent, the government decided to institute a special agency for dacoity control headed by the Commissioner for the Suppression of Dacoity in April 1852.²²

The Commissioner was vested with co-ordinate powers of a Magistrate in the districts of 24-Purganahs, Midnapore, Howrah, Hooghly, Baraset and Jessore, i. e., the adjoining districts surrounding the seat of government over which his authority initially extended. He had his headquarters at Bandel in Hooghly, and his subordinate magistrates operated from Jessore, Midnapore and Murshidabad with the extension of the jurisdiction of his office gradually over almost the whole of Bengal by the early 1860s. The Commissioner was given no other duties to interfere with the performance

of this important work, and he had, like the thuggee officers, powers to execute his own warrants and order the assistance of the police in all the districts over which his authority extended. Moreover, the Dacoity Commissioner was permitted to work simultaneously in several districts to follow up dacoits from district to district, and to have all its commitments tried before a single officer, viz, the Additional Sessions Judge of Hooghly. These were great advantages which the Department had over the ordinary Local Courts and according to the Dacoity Commissioner, all the good that had been effected by the Department was attributed chiefly to these privileges.²³

As one of the principal difficulties in the prosecution and conviction of dacoits was thought to be the lack of suitable evidence, the Dacoity Commissioner early adopted the approver witness system which had in the past proved extremely efficacious not only in Bengal but elsewhere in India as well. "This is the only system that has answered in this country in every instance in which gangs of men have associated together to commit crime. It has answered in Thuggee and poisoning cases; and it has also suppressed Dacoity to some extent. It is a system which strikes at the root of all confederacies or brotherhoods. The members cease to have confidence on each other; it destroys the prestige of *sirdars* or leaders; it breaks through all ties of blood, brother denouncing brother. One member distrusts another, not knowing when he may purchase his pardon by sacrificing his gang. The arrest of a single dacoit is often the signal for the rest to disperse."²⁴ Besides the approver system, the Dacoity Commissioners availed of the opportunity of Act XXIV of 1843 of Indian Legislature which was originally enacted for the conviction of professional dacoits, who belonged to certain tribes, systematically employed in carrying on their lawless pursuits in different parts of the country.²⁵ The application of the said Act was broadened obviously under the directives of the government by the judges of the *Nizamat Adawlat* on October 25, 1852 after an argument before a full Court. It was settled that the provisions of the said Act were applicable to all dacoits, and that the act of going out once knowingly and voluntarily with a gang of dacoits, constituted the offence of belonging to a gang of dacoits, and the proof of having joined a gang of dacoits was of itself sufficient to render a party liable to the penalties of the Act.²⁶

II

Armed with special powers, the operations of the Dacoity Commissioner (S. Wauchope was the first Dacoity Commissioner) not unnaturally started in Calcutta. Herein, a large number of criminal gangs had settled down

which were regularly carrying out their depredations on the residents of the neighbouring districts, viz., Howrah, Baraset, Serampore and Hooghly.²⁷ In the first year of his appointment, he was able to break up parts of the Ram Thakoor's Calcutta gang which committed no less than 83 dacoities between 1841 and 1850; Cheeroo and Jadoo Mallah's gang who were concerned in about 80 river dacoities in all parts of Bengal; Bechroo Kowra and Trilook Sirdar's gang; Koylash Tantee's gang and Nobin Bagdee's gang of Pundooah, Hooghly. Besides, 41 individual members of other gangs had been convicted, and 30 others were on trial.²⁸ But the arrests of so many criminals in Calcutta quickly dispersed the gangs in that city, and many of them took shelter in the French Settlement of Chandernagore which was said to be "swarming with dacoits driven from Calcutta, or the remnants of Mofussil gangs".²⁹ With great difficulty, however, these gangs could ultimately be broken up with the help of the French authorities.³⁰ *Bedyas*, a gipsy tribe of Bengal, who were implicated in dacoity cases at least since March, 1842³¹ and who were then operating in the districts of Baraset, Nadia and 24-Purganahs under their chiefs Gour Shikaree, Kerandee Shikaree, Haneef Shikaree and Khurshid Shikaree were proceeded against. Most of the leading men of these gangs including Gour Shikaree and Keramdee Shikaree were transported, and very few remained at large capable of leading the gangs.³² In 1854-55, another gang, mostly composed of Mussulmans, ostensibly employed themselves as *mootyas* or carriers in the city of Calcutta was discovered and actions taken against them.³³

Dacoity Commissioner also proceeded against the formidable gangs of Hooghly, some members of which were from Bihar and the Upper Provinces³⁴ while some others were from Burdwan who were employed in Hooghly as *lattiaras* and sentries and committed depredations with the local gangs.³⁵ Kangalee Mussulman of Pundooah whose very name was a terror in the district was arrested along with Sona Faqueer and 34 other members of the Faqueer gang who committed 56 dacoities in less than three years.³⁶ Regarding Kangalee, the Dacoity Commissioner remarked: "He had gained such a name among the robbers, that with him as their leader they were always prepared to go out on an expedition. The villagers frequently assembled and opposed and fought with his gang, and wounding continually occurred on both sides, but, with Kangalee at their head, armed with his spear and gun, the gang always beat back or frightened away their opponents."³⁷ Another notorious character arrested was Cheero Chung, who on turning an approver, gave details of 49 dacoities committed by him in the neighbourhood of Hooghly and Bansberrian Thana. Prior to his giving information, the office had no knowledge of the existence of this gang.³⁸ With the apprehension of old gangs, however, new gangs were

sprouting up. One such was that of Ram Coomer Chung who formed a gang in Thana Hooghly and Benioor after his release from Hooghly jail where he was imprisoned for then years for dacity.³⁹

The neighbouring district of Howrah also abounded in dacoits. The Office in 1853-54 gained information about two gangs settled in the town of Howrah. The leader of one of these gangs was Neemchand Poddar, a shop keeper. He was previously a receiver of stolen property from the gangs of river dacoits. The latter having been discovered and arrested, he put himself at the head of a gang of bad-characters living in the houses of prostitutes in Howrah.⁴⁰ J. R. Ward, the Dacoity Commissioner also succeeded in arresting a notorious dacoit named Madhu Chung who had committed 24 dacoities since the commencement of his career as a dacoit in 1841.⁴¹

Midnapore, likewise, swarmed with bad characters, especially its Salt Thannahs.⁴² In this large district, there was perhaps no thana where distinct gangs, and in some two or even three, did not operate. However, "they do not appear to commit dacoity after dacoity in the systematic manner in which the Calcutta, Hooghly and other gangs did. Few of the Dacoits have apparently committed more than three or four Dacoities in the same year, and generality of them only one or two."⁴³ Another characteristic of the gangs of this district was the fact that dacoits were also regular burglars.⁴⁴

The operations against dacoits in this district was first in the hands of Capt. Keigley and later in charge of Capt. Baddom who through their personal exertions was able to keep the figures of dacoity under control until the month of June. 1861 when the Midnapore office was abolished.⁴⁵

Although Jessore was one of the original districts to be included under the jurisdiction of the Dacoity Commissioner, its operation did not extend to this area till much latter.⁴⁶ As a result some of the formidable gangs of dacoits had collected together in this district from the neighbouring areas, increasing the incidence of dacoity from 23 in 1852 to 68 in 1855.⁴⁷ In 1858, one of the large and active gangs was broken up, headed by Foyzuddy Sheikh, a notorious laltial dacoit.⁴⁸ Besides, Babu Guru Charan Doss employed in this district as a Deputy Magistrate in the Dacoity Department was able in the late 1850's and early 1860's to make a number of approvers (there were 38 approvers in Jessore in 1861) and gain valuable information.⁴⁹ The operation, though started late, appears to have met with considerable success though in 1861 it suffered a setback due to indigo and rent disputes; and also due to the absence of the Deputy Magistrate from his station for four months and a half at the commencement of the year, and to illness for two months at the close of the year.⁵⁰

The indigo district of Nadia, which had become extremely notorious, was included in the jurisdiction of the Dacoity Office in April, 1853.⁵¹ In

spite of the universal protection given to the dacoits/lattials of this district by the landlords and indigo planters, the operations of the Dacoity Commissioner seem to have been crowned with success in this district. Haro Sirdar the head man of all the gangs in the Sooksagar thana was committed by E. Jackson, the Dacoity Commissioner and was transported.⁵² Hurrish Ghose, better known as Golakata Hursha, from his having received a severe tulwar wound in his neck in a river dacoity, was sentenced to transportation for life.⁵³ Celebrated dacoit Jaddo Mussulman, who had begun his dacoity career under Gour Shikaree somewhere about 1846 and had created a reign of terror in Calcutta, Chandarnagore and Burdwan, was at last apprehended in Naida, whither he had gone seeking for refuge. The gang of Matabdee, the members of which were all Muslims with the exception of one, was broken up. The sirdar of this gang, it was said, before admitting anyone to its membership used to apply a burning chillum to the thigh of each to test the mettle of his men.⁵⁴ "Whether they all stood the ordeal as was required or not, it is sure that only one man ever confessed, and that each of those who have passed through our hands had a scar on the left thigh, caused by a burn, about the same place; i. e. , high enough to be covered by the dhotie."⁵⁵ Notorious dacoit leader Panchoo Khan was also arrested and confessed to no less than 25 dacoities.⁵⁶ He was retained as an approver and eight men of his gang were transported. Well-known dacoit sirdars Gooee Dye, Lalloo Biswas, Goomanee Sirdar, Bahur and Madhut Malla who carried out their depredations in Meherpur, Hardee, Shurgoohie and Pabna thannas, both on land and on the rivers, were proceeded against.⁵⁷ Jonny Dick, a dacoit of Anglo-Indian descent, Khookra Sheikh, Nazir Sheikh, and Baker Sheikh, all notorious dacoit, were also arrested.⁵⁸ Prem Mussulman, who succeeded Haro Sirdar, was also confined. As a result of vigorous anti-dacoity operations, much good was said to be effected in Nadia district which formerly was regarded as a land of dacoits.⁵⁹ Burdwan was one of those districts which was infested with robbers, and with the extension of the Dacoity Commissioner's operations, the district included within his jurisdiction in October, 1854.⁶⁰ Members of the Faqueer gang who were very active in this district were broken up through the incessant exertions and pursuit maintained by the Department. Its principal leaders, Sona Faqueer and Goohee Sheikh, along with some others were captured and convicted.⁶¹ Sonatun Mundul and Thakoordass Dome, who spent their lives in this profession, were brought to book.⁶² Gora Sirdar, a professional dacoit, who was proceeded against along with other members of his gang had, however, to be released under orders of the Nizam-at-Adawlat.⁶³ But the distinguishing feature of the Dacoity Commissioner's operations in this district was marked by his vigilance on the small

Talukders and landholders who were found generally, more or less, in league with dacoits. Several of them were named, and some were warned of severe consequences.⁶⁴ The office also proceeded against receivers of stolen property but due to difficulties of law, in spite of knowledge of their operations, very little could be accomplished.⁶⁵ Yet the overall result achieved in suppressing dacoitis was very impressive-dacoities had diminished from 62 in 1854 to only 4 in 1862.⁶⁶

With the success of the Department, its jurisdiction was further extended to Murshidabad in November, 1856; Pabna and Faridpur in 1858 and in Birbhum in 1859.⁶⁷ Many other districts were also added in 1860 and 1861 so as to include almost the whole of the province. A Deputy Magistrate working exclusively under the Dacoity Commissioner was posted in Murshidabad, and he was able through approvers to curb this menacing crime to some extent (there were 23 approvers on 31 December, 1861 at Murshidabad). He was also able to discover that some of the crimes in this district were committed by the Irregular Sowars stationed at Berhampore who had either "little or no employment".⁶⁸ The sepoys attached to the Nawab's Establishment also committed a dacoity. the crime of dacoity, which in the district of Birbhum was committed mostly by dacoits under the protection of landlords; and to some extent by the railway coolies⁶⁹ had also decreased with the operation of the activities of the Dacoity Office in this district. Contrary to land dacoities, most dacoities in Pabna on the other hand, were committed on the banks of the Jumna river. "If the Dacoits find a boat alone on a Chur they suddenly board her and carry away all the property they can: they are seldom recognized, the only information being that the Dacoits spoke in Hindee or Bengallee."⁷⁰ In 1858, a gang of river dacoits, composed chiefly of up-countrymen (who had been employed as *lattials*) were caught and convicted in a curious manner. The plaintiff's boat was robbed of everything, and as the dacoits were about to decamp, the plaintiff entreated them to leave him a cloth to cover him. One of them, moved by his entreaty, threw him a cloth, in the corner of which was a *athchitta*, with the names of several of the gang. Another up-country gang of dacoits belonging to the Bind caste who had robbed Ragoonath Shaw and other merchants of Rs. 10,000 in Pabna was also arrested in 1860.⁷¹ With their arrest, dacoity had considerably decreased in this part of the province. Earlier, the efforts of the Dacoity Office in this district had suffered a temporary setback due to the unexpected release of 13 members of a gang of dacoits by the Nizamat Adawlat in 1859 (the Sessions Judge had committed them to 16 years imprisonment).⁷²

Although reported dacoity cases in Faridpur itself was the lowest in Bengal, the district was not without its due share of such criminal elements.

But unlike other districts, these criminals were principally river dacoits and carried out their depredations at a distance from their homes to such places as in the Sunderbund rivers, and up the Bhagirutty and the Nadia rivers when these were navigable.⁷³ One such formidable gang of dacoits, who were the terror of boatmen in the sunderbunds passages for the last fifty years was broken up.⁷⁴ They used to come down every year from Faridpur, and residing in Calcutta for several months, committed dacoity in the above waterways.⁷⁵ Of about 80 men on the gang, 35 persons were convicted in 1862 including their leader Nobin Nundy.⁷⁶ The judge, in addition to passing sentence of transportation, had also imposed fine on each of the dacoits to reimburse the merchants for the losses they had sustained by the dacoities. The imposition of the fines enabled the Department to sell, through the Magistrate of the district, the houses and other property belonging to the dacoits. "This has been noised throughout the District and has made so salutary an impression on the people of the District that I believe it will be some time before they venture on marauding expeditions into the Soonderbunds."⁷⁷ Earlier, in 1859, two of the gang were convicted for committing dacoities of the river Hooghly below Diamind Harbour, during the annual fair, which was held in Gunga Saugar.⁷⁸

Dacoity Commissioner also launched his operations against the river dacoits who infested the numerous rivers and their tributaries. Besides Cheero and Jadoo Mallah's gang of river dacoits of whom at least 14 were convicted in the first year of dacoity operation two other gangs, one headed by Hulladhar Mala of Taldahmatyaree, Thana Dowlatgunge, Zilla Nadia, and another by Bhogoban Ghose of Babla Bashnah, Thana Beneepore, Zilla Hooghly were convicted in the second year.⁷⁹ Another noted river dacoit, Sreenath Dutt, who was formerly Mohurrir in a Salt Chowkee, and admitted to have been engaged in 50 dacoities in the last four years, was made an approver.⁸⁰ In 1858, Seeboo Malla with another two river dacoits of Sreerampore were arrested, but before Seeboo could be made an approver, he died.⁸¹ Thakoordoss Tantee, who confessed to have committed at least 9 river dacoities and who was sentenced to 14 years imprisonment, was made an approver.⁸² River dacoities were also frequent in the Hooghly river between Chinsura and Calcutta. The Dacoity Office was able to arrest Degumber Mallah who admitted to have committed eight river dacoities.⁸³ He named his fifteen accomplices, of which 11 were ultimately convicted.⁸⁴ Gangs of dacoits of the Bind tribe who lived in the neighborhood of Buxar, and Dosads from Ghazeepur also frequented Bengal every rainy season with the intention of committing dacoities in the districts, among others, in Malda, Rajshahi, Murshidabad, Pabna, Jessore, Dacca, Mymensingh and probably also in the Sunderbunds.⁸⁵ It was extremely difficult to apprehend

these foreign criminals. "The Binds and Dosads are strangers. No one of them can be recognized in the act. Bengalee villagers never pursue dacoits, and by the time the police reach the plundered house, the Binds have gone a day's journey down stream, leaving no track behind."⁸⁶ However, the Bind gang which committed several dacoities including plundering the boat of Ragoonath Shaw in Pabna, as mentioned earlier, was apprehended. But of all the highways of river traffic, the most infested route was undoubtedly the sunderbund chanel and the rivers of the Backergunge district. The value of goods lost in the Sunderbund alone in one year by the two Beemah of insurance merchants of Calcutta, Dhunsook Hazazee Mul and Kistodeb Bhutto, amounted to upwards of twenty thousand rupees.⁸⁷ As a result of constant peril to which the valuable commerce of this province was subjected to, and the petition submitted by Raja Burroda Caunt Roy Bahadoor to the Hon'ble Lt. Governor of Bengal, setting forth the dangers experienced by persons travelling between Khulna and Barisal,⁸⁸ the operations of the Dacoity Commissioner was geared up in 1859 by the placement of the whole of the River Police Establishment in the Sunderbund under him and also by the despatch of a steam Gun Boat with a small police force to the Backergunge Sunderbund channels for the capture of river dacoits.⁸⁹ Baboo Gooroo Churn Doss, one of the Deputy Magistrates working in the Dacoity Department was deputed to take charge of the Gun Boat.⁹⁰ The Officer collected a mass of information regarding the chief dacoits of the district; the gangs with which they were connected; and the beats within which their operations were confined.⁹¹ But the dacoits, in numerous cases, were protected by the landholders, the most important of them being the Zemindar of Roy Kuttee. Under such circumstances, the officer could hardly proceed against even such well-known dakoos like Kally Barowi, Futtick Khan and Khas Mahomood. Regarding the outcome of this special gun-boat mission against river dacoits, the Dacoity Commissioner informed the Secretary, Government of Bengal: "... he has no hope of obtaining the evidence required by the Sudder against the persons regarding whom he has obtained information, and has failed in every instance in which he has proceeded against River Dacoits, who have not confessed, I see but little hope of chinking the crime except by close and efficient patrol of the Rivers which are infested by them."⁹² Accordingly, to remedy the "defective arrangements which now exists for the prevention of Dacoity and other serious offences in the Soonderbun channels", the Government asked the Inspector-General of Police, Lower Provinces to submit to the Lt. Governor a carefully considered scheme of River Police to patrol the water routes between Calcutta and Backergunge.⁹³ The scheme was submitted to the government on August 17, 1863 and accepted by the

Lt. Governor on October 6 of the same year.⁹⁴ It envisaged for the *sunderbun*, a District Superintendent with an Assistant, 2 Inspectors, 8 Sub-Inspectors, 34 head Constables and 353 Constables with 41 boats.⁹⁵ The establishment, it may be mentioned, was placed in the hands of one, Mr. Crank, an experienced officer, who had served for many years in the Salt Department.⁹⁶

III

The overall result of anti-dacoity operations had been three-fold. In the first place, it remarkably reduced the crime of dacoity, especially in those areas in which their energies were particularly confined, viz, 24 Pergunahs, Howrah, Baraset, Hooghly, Burdwan, Nadia, Jessore, Murshidabad, Pabna and Faridpur. Even compared with the average number of gang robberies committed in the above districts from 1852-59, there was a decrease of dacoities in those districts of about 58 per cent in 1860.⁹⁷ The figure was still better for 1862, when there were 94 reported dacoities compared to 105 in 1860.⁹⁸ In Midnapore and Birbhum, the two other districts brought under the jurisdiction of the Dacoity Office in the 1850's, dacoities also fell considerably. The number of dacoities in Midnapore from 1852 to 1861 averaged around 22 compared to around 56 for the years 1847-49.⁹⁹ Birbhum dacoities, the average of which was around 33 during the period 1856-58, was also reduced to nearly its half-19 in the four years 1859-62.¹⁰⁰ But it should be pointed out that the efficiency and vigour of the Department diminished considerably with the addition of most other districts to the jurisdiction of the Dacoity Commissioner in 1860 and 1861. The sudden stiff rise in the price of Bengal rice from 1856 onwards must have also created additional problems for the Dacoity office.¹⁰¹ In the second place, as a result of anti-dacoity operations, a large number of gangs were broken up and dacoits proceeded against leading to numerous conviction. Till 1858, according to Dacoity Office sources, 802 men were punished, of whom 761 were transported for life,³⁹ imprisoned for a term and 2 were released upon security.¹⁰² The figure of those sentenced to transportation alone rose to 1,115 by the end of 1862.¹⁰³ The punishments, no doubt, were most drastic and the fear it instilled in the breasts of dacoits had a diminutive effect on the crime barometer. An extreme case, for example, was that of Lylah Mussulman who was arrested on board the ship in which he was to sail for England, along with three of his companions, not because any attempts had been made to arrest them, but because their own conscience told them that sooner or later they would be implicated.¹⁰⁴ Lastly, not only dacoity became less frequent, the violence and torture which these ruffians practised on

their victims was also reduced significantly. Compared to 123 cases of dacoity with murder in Bengal in 1854-55,¹⁰⁵ there were only 8 such cases, and 36 with attempts to cause death, or grivous hurt in 1864.¹⁰⁶ "It will not have escaped ovbservation that a distinctive feature in modern Dacoities in [is] the absence of cruelty and torture, and generally of all aggravating circumstances. The fact is, that professional gangs of Dacoits, by whom violence used to be practiced habitually, have disappeared a result due to the exertions of the Dacoity Department", observed the Inspector-General of Police.¹⁰⁷

Although dacoity was reduced and it became less frightening, operations against dacoits led to an increase in the incidence of burglary. This was the natural consequence of the breaking up of gangs of dacoits into small parties and taking to the safer and equally profitable crime of burglary. "I have no hesitation in saying" remarked the Commissioner of Police, Calcutta, "after very careful and diligent enquiry, that, in those Districts where the Dacoity Commissioner has worked with the greatest vigor [*sic*], Burglary has increased in nearly the same proportion as Dacoity has decreased. Dacoits have become Burglars and taken to a trade which is much less dangerous and quite as profitable."¹⁰⁸ That this was so was also admitted by the Dacoity Commissioner himself who warned of further increases of burglary with the increasing success of his Department.¹⁰⁹ Moreover, it may further be pointed out that with the beginning of anti-dacoity operations, numerous bandits who were named in Dacoity Office had absconded into other districts and many more, not yet named, arresting fear, also deserted Dacoity Commissioner's juriseictions. This had the effect of reducing dacoity in one area, while increasing the menace in other parts of the province. It was to this fact that the increase in dacoities in the central districts of Murshidabad, Rajshahi, Pabna, Birbhum, Rangpur; Dinajpur and Purneah was attributed.¹¹⁰ With the gradual extension of Dacoity Commissioner's operations to almost the whole of Bengal, the mobility of dacoits probably got restricted to. Another important result was regarding the choice of victims. Whereas "formerly Dacoits attacked the wealthy and the strong; they now attack the middling classes, who suffer more by Dacoity than the wealthier classes."¹¹¹ The explanation possibly lay in the gradual disappearance of professional dacoits who were perhaps more careful in the selection of their victims.

The Special Agency whcih was established in April, 1852 for the purpose of suppressing dacoity was abolished in June, 1863.¹¹² There were certain natural causes which decided against its continuance. The creation of an organized efficient police, and the establishment of an uniform and widely spread system of management superseded the necessity of such separate

establishment avowedly maintained because the general police was inefficient. The Police Commission of 1860 hence recommended that such special agencies as those of the Thuggee and Dacoity Departments should gradually be absorbed into the Police, and the existing establishment of officers, officials, approvers, be distributed among the police of the several provinces, so soon as the organization of the police would be sufficiently advanced to admit of it.¹¹³ The Government also became fully convinced by then that the police and the magistrates should be made wholly and solely responsible for the maintenance of law and order in their respective jurisdictions rather than continue with an agency which had no direct control over the police. During this time, it may be mentioned, the magistrates had fallen into the habit of placing too great reliance on the operations of the Special Department, and had omitted to attach sufficient importance to the duty of checking a crime for the existence of which they did not consider themselves wholly responsible, and for any diminution of which credit was always claimed by, and given to, not the District Magistrate, but the Dacoity Commissioner.¹¹⁴ It was also pointed out that the achievements of the Department in the later years of its existence was not marked by any spectacular success, and indeed in some districts there was an increase in the incidence of dacoity.¹¹⁵ But probably the most objectionable part of the system was the blending of judicial and police functions in a manner as they were in the Dacoity Department, where the tracing out of criminals, the charge of the approvers who were the chief witnesses against these criminals and the committal of the cases for trial were all vested in one man, practically exempt from all control. Such a man and his officers, under the above system, were only interested in obtaining a conviction. Government, therefore, desired to vest judicial powers in the hands of Officials less interested in obtaining a conviction and less biased in favour of the approver witnesses than the Dacoity Commissioner was likely to be.¹¹⁶

In April, 1852, encouraged by measures of success in combating thuggee and dacoity in the North-Western Provinces, the Government of Bengal appointed a Special Agency for the suppression of the crime of dacoity. Special privileges over the ordinary local courts were granted to the Dacoity Commissioner and to his Officers for the apprehension and committal of criminals. The Office by adopting the approver witness system and by availing the new interpretation of Act XXIV of 1843 was able to bring a large number of dacoits to book. By the close of the year 1862, over 1100 men were sentenced to transportation only. In spite of the apparent success, however, the crime of dacoity was still much prevalent. "There is a great difference between eradicating gangs of hereditary Dacoits of Thugs and the Dacoits of

Bengal. The Buddhucks and Keechucks were one particular caste, and immediately the approvers' evidence was brought to bear against them, they were destroyed. The Thugs, though belonging to all castes, were comparatively speaking few in number, and when evidence was obtained against them, the Land Gangs were at once exterminated, and the River Gangs sufficiently so to keep them quiet; but Dacoity in Bengal embraces every class and caste of the rural population of those Districts in which the crime was rife."¹¹⁷ It has also to be remembered that whatever success the Dacoity Office made was at the cost of curtailing civil liberties of the subject population by adopting tyrannical proceedings for the detection of crimes and criminals which would hardly be tolerated in civilized countries where constitutional liberty was established. Moreover, the overall benefit arising from adopting a 'sharp remedy to a sharp disease' was uncertain as it gave rise to increased burglaries, diffused crime over a wider area, and brought the middle classes within the purview of villainous desperados. The government, therefore, felt that since eradication of dacoity was an impossibility, civilized institutional checks through regular organized police force (which was being setup) was a better alternative. Henceforth, the task of containing dacoity was assigned to the new civil Constabulary.¹¹⁸

Notes and References :

1. Sandria Freitag, 'Collective Crime and Authority in North India', in Anand A. Yang (ed.) *Crime and Criminality in British India* (Arizona, 1985), pp. 140-63.
2. David Arnold, 'Crime and Crime Control in Madras, 1858-1947', in *Ibid*, p. 71.
3. W. R. Gourlay, *A Contribution towards a History of the Police in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1916), p. 25.
4. *Ibid*, pp. 27-28.
5. *Ibid*, p. 28.
6. See, Fifth Report' of the Select Committee, 1813, in *Ibid*, pp. 39-40
7. Anandwarup Gupta, *Crime and Police in India* (up to 1861) (New Delhi, 1974), p. 63.
8. Gourlay, *op. cit.*, pp. 37-38.
9. *Ibid*, p. 43.
10. *Ibid*.
11. IOLR, V/26/150/1, *Report of the Committee on Improvement of Mufussel Police, Bengal, 1838* [Henceforth referred to as RCIMP] See, Oral evidence of W. C. Blaquiére on November 11, 1937.
12. Gupta, *op.cit.*, pp. 163, 177.
13. See, Minute by the Lt. Governor of Bengal on Report by the Commissioner for the Suppression of Dacoity in Bengal, 1853-54, in IOLR, V/23/94, p. 30.
14. Letter from the Secretary, Government of Bengal [Henceforth referred to as GOB] to the Secretary, GOB, Home Department, March 11, 1852 in *Ibid*, p. 56.
15. Letter of W. Wauchope, Magistrate of Hooghly, dt. August 9, 1851 to the Superintendent of Police, lower Provinces in *Ibid*, p. 18.

16. *Annual Report on the Administration of the Bengal Presidency during the year 1859-60* (Calcutta, 1861), p. 7.
17. *Report by the Commissioner for the Suppression of Dacoity in Bengal*, [Henceforth referred to as RCSD], 1853-54, p. 18.
18. James Hutton, *A Popular Account of the Thugs and Dacoits, the Hereditary Garotters and Gang-Robbers of India* (London, 1857), pp. 92-93; W. H. Sleeman, *Report on Budhuk alias Bagree Dacoits and other Gang Robbers by Hereditary Profession and on the measures adopted by the Government of India for their Suppression* (Calcutta, 1841), p. 116.
19. RCIMP, Note by D. C. Smyth, Appendix B, p. viii.
20. *Ibid*, para 4.
21. *Ibid*, para 43.
22. S. Wauchope, Magistrate of Hooghly was appointed to be the Commissioner for the Suppression of Dacoity, on a salary of Rs. 1,500/= per mensem, initially for a year. He was to receive detailed instructions regarding his duties through the Suptd. of Police, Lower Provinces. See, Letter from Under-Secretary, GOB, to Wauchope, dt. April 26, 1852 in IOLR, V/23/94, Correspondence which led to the appointment of the Commissioner of Dacoity, p. 58.
23. RCSD, 1862, p. 4.
24. *Ibid*, para 27.
25. See, 'Acts Passed by the Legislative Council of India for the Suppression of Thuggee and Dacoity', from 1836 till 1848 in Sleeman, *op. cit.*, pp. 353-57.
26. It may be pointed out that had the *Nizamat Adawlat* not been unanimous in its decision to extend the provisions of the Act, the GOI would have proceeded to pass special legislation to overcome the difficulties of the Act. See, GOB, Judicial Proceedings, April 21, 1859, No. 149.
27. IOLR, V/23/94, Correspondence which led to the Appointment of the Commissioner of Dacoity, p. 69.
28. *Ibid*, pp. 74-75.
29. *Ibid*, p. 71.
30. RCSD, 1854-55, p. 8.
31. *Ibid*, 1853-54, Appendix A, pp. ii-iii.
32. *Ibid*, 1854-55, pp. 7-8.
33. *Ibid*, p. 9.
34. *Second Annual Report of the Working of the Civil Constabulary, Lower Provinces, Bengal* (for the year 1863) (Calcutta, 1864), p. 30.
35. RCSD, 1859, pp. 6-7.
36. *Ibid*, 1855, pp. 11-12.
37. *Ibid*, 1854-55, pp. 11-12.
38. *Ibid*, 1855, p. 12.
39. *Ibid*, 1856, pp. 18-19.
40. *Ibid*, 1853-54, p. 20.
41. *Report on the Administration of Public Affairs in Bengal Presidency for the Year 1855-56* (Calcutta, 1857), p. 30.
42. RCSD, 1855, Appendix A, p. ii.
43. *Ibid*.
44. *Ibid*, 1856, p. 32.
45. *Ibid*, 1861, p. 30.
46. Gupta, *op. cit.*, Appendix III, p. xxiii.

47. RCSD, 1861 Table 2, p. 38.
48. *Ibid*, 1858, pp. 25-26.
49. *Ibid*, 1861, p. 34.
50. *Ibid*, p. 25.
51. *Ibid*, 1853-54, p. 17.
52. *Ibid*, p. 17; *Ibid*, 1854-55, p. 13.
53. *Ibid*, 1856, pp. 26-27.
54. *Ibid*, p. 25.
55. *Ibid*.
56. *Ibid*, 1858, pp. 21-22.
57. *Ibid*.
58. *Ibid*; also in Appendix D, p. xxxiii.
59. *Ibid*, 1861, p. 25.
60. *Ibid*, 1854-55, p. 6.
61. *Bengal Administration Report*, 1855-56, p. 31.
62. *Ibid*; RCSD, 1859, pp. 8-9.
63. RCSD, 1859, pp. 8-9.
64. The report named the following men of influence for harbouring Dacoits: (1) Sree Hurry Hazfah of Bangurrea Village, (2) Juggesshwar Sirkar; (3) Khettermohun Bose of Roynah Thana, and (4) Oottum Dutt, also of Roynah Thana. *Ibid*, 1858, pp. 16-18.
65. *Ibid*, p. 16; *Ibid*, 1856, pp. 21-22.
66. *Ibid*, 1861, Table 2, p. 38; *Ibid*, 1862, p. 3.
67. *Ibid*, 1856, p. 32; *Ibid*, 1858, p. 37; *Ibid*, 1859, p. 18.
68. *Ibid*, 1858, p. 27.
69. *Ibid*, 1856, Appendix F, pp. xxiv-xxv; *Bengal Administration Report*, 1857-58, pp. 45-46.
70. RCSD, 1862, p. 29.
71. *Ibid*, p. 29.
72. *Ibid*, 1859, p. 14.
73. George Plowden, Commissioner of the Burdwan Division to the Secretary GOB, in Judicial proceedings, GOB, July 1863, No. 6, p. 5; RCSD, 1861, p. 27.
74. RCSD, 1862, pp. 20-21.
75. George Plowden to Secretary in GOB, Judicial Progs, July 1863, No. 6, p. 5.
76. *Ibid*; RCSD, 1862, p. 31.
77. RCSD, 1862, p. 31.
78. *Ibid*, p. 20.
79. *Ibid*, 1853-54, p. 21.
80. *Ibid*;
81. *Ibid*, 1858, pp. 11-12.
82. *Ibid*.
83. *Ibid*, 1861, pp. 20-21; GOB, Judicial Progs, January 1862, No. 55, pp. 38-39.
84. *Ibid*, 1861, pp. 20-21.
85. *Ibid*, pp. 26-27, 32-33; GOB, Judicial Progs, January 1860, No. 58, pp. 506-08. See, letter from the Commissioner of Patna Division to the Secretary, GOB.
86. GOB, Judicial Progs, January 1860, No. 58, p. 507.
87. GOB, Judicial, September 1862, No. 46, pp. 19-20. See, Letter from J. H. Reilly, Dacoity Commissioner of Bengal to the Commissioner of Burdwan Division (No. 541, dt. August 20, 1862).
88. GOB, Judicial, May, 1859, No. 158, pp. 257-58.

89. *Ibid*, December 1859, Nos. 64-70, pp. 137-45.
90. *Ibid*.
91. *Bengal Administration Report*, 1859-60, pp. 7-9.
92. GOB, Judicial, July 1860, No. 302. See, Letter from A. J. Jackson, Dacoity Commissioner of Bengal to the Secretary, GOB.
93. GOB, Judicial, February 1863, No. 321, pp. 165-66.
94. *Second Annual Report of the Working of the Civil Constabulary, Lower Provinces, Bengal* (for the year 1863) (Calcutta, 1864), pp. 85-86.
95. *Ibid*.
96. *Ibid*.
97. GOB, Judicial, March 1862, No. 122, pp. 101-2.
98. *Ibid*; RCSD, 1862, p. 3.
99. Gupta, *op.cit.*, Appendix II, Table 4; RCSD, 1861, *Table 2, p. 38.
100. RCSD, 1861, Table 2, p. 38; *Ibid*, 1862, p. 3.
101. A. S. M. Akhtar Hussain, "A Quantitative Study of Price Movements in Bengal during Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries" (Unpublished Ph. D. thesis, University of London, 1977), p. 285.
102. GOI, Home (Judicial), February '10, 1860, No. 2. Letter from W. Grey, Secretary, GOI, to E. H. Lushington, Secretary, GOB, No. 300, dt. January 31, 1860.
103. RCSD, 1862, pp. 9-10.
104. *Ibid*, 1853-54, p. 25; *Ibid*, 1854-55, p. 142.
105. 'Criminal Statistics and jail Discipline in Bengal', in *The Calcutta Review*, Vol. XXX (January-June, 1858) (Calcutta, 1858) p. 280.
106. *Third Annual Report of the Working of the Civil Constabulary, Lower Provinces, Bengal* (Calcutta, 1865), pp. 4-5.
107. *Second Annual Report of the Working of the Civil Constabulary, Lower Provinces, Bengal*, p. 50.
108. *Report on the Police Administration of the Suburbs for 1861-62*, para 13.
109. RCSD, 1861, pp. 21-22.
110. *Ibid*, 1853-54, p. 25.
111. *Ibid*, 1862, p. 37.
112. Gourlay, *op.cit.*, p. 160; GOB, Judicial Progs, July 1863 No. 8, p. 5.
113. GOI, Home (Judicial) Progs, October 3, 1860, No. 35, p. 389. See, Propositions unanimously recorded by the Police Commission, as the basis of a police System and of an organized Constabulary.
114. GOB, Judicial, July 1863, No. 8, p. 4.
115. *Ibid*, pp. 3-4.
116. *Ibid*, p. 4.
117. RCSD, 1855, Appendix A, p. ii.
118. GOB, Judicial Progs, July 1863, No. 8, p. 5.